

Section 2: Development of Fathers for Life - A Statewide Approach

While much of the implementation of the Fathers for Life program occurs at the local level, leadership from a statewide steering team is critical for building a successful program. This section contains tools and suggestions to consider in the development of a statewide infrastructure for providing leadership and guidance to family support initiatives.

Public Awareness

Fathers for Life public awareness tools and strategies are designed to:

- Educate professionals statewide about the importance of fathers;
- Help professionals and agencies understand some of the issues children and families face when they have family members in prison and that ex-offenders face when they re-enter the community;
- Encourage agency involvement in statewide efforts to better serve families that interface with the criminal justice system; and
- Educate agencies about the programs and services available to fathers re-entering communities and why support structures are so important.

The Fathers for Life statewide steering team will be critical to the success of public awareness efforts. For this reason, project leaders should involve all team members in distributing information using some or all of the following strategies:

- **Initial Meetings with Department and Division Leadership** - During the initial phases of the Fathers for Life project, project leaders will schedule and host individual meetings with relevant state department and division leaders. These initial meetings will educate decision makers about the project's value and the need to collaborate. This step will likely serve as the first public awareness strategy for this initiative.
- **Statewide Head Start Communications Channels** - Head Start agencies will be critical partners throughout the implementation process. Thus, it will be important during the early phases of the project for Head Start management to become knowledgeable about the project and the issues facing families that interface with the criminal justice system. Project leaders should collaborate with state Head Start associations to maximize existing communication methods to increase project awareness.
- **Communication Plans** - Once the statewide steering team is formed, individual members will be responsible for informing agency personnel at all levels of their organizations about the Fathers for Life project. Steering team members will be asked to develop communications plans outlining their strategies for achieving this goal. Sample communication, plans and templates are included in Section 5.

- **Press Releases** - Press releases can be an effective statewide communications tool. State steering teams may choose to issue a press release to announce the launch of their Fathers for Life effort. A sample press release is included in Section 5.

Building a Statewide Team

A successful Fathers for Life initiative is guided by a committed statewide, multi-agency team. A diverse and comprehensive state level steering team is critical to creating policy changes and developing innovative local-level strategies. Statewide steering teams can serve a number of roles in the planning and implementation process. For example, members of a statewide steering team can:

- Maintain a knowledge base of resources and supports available to fathers;
- Actively participate in work groups to guide decision-making and problem-solving related to program implementation;
- Serve as program advocates;
- Advocate for state-level systems changes that will contribute to more effective support systems for children in local communities; and
- Help project leaders identify and prepare local steering team members from their respective agencies.

The statewide steering team should include fathers under the supervision of probation and parole, mothers of Head Start children with incarcerated fathers, and key stakeholders from partnering organizations.

Who Should be Involved

An effective statewide team will include representatives from agencies who can best advocate for systems change for families. Representatives should be able to regularly attend highly interactive monthly meetings. Steering team members should demonstrate a high level of energy and general willingness to accept and complete assignments outside monthly meetings. They also should hold enough agency authority to be able to make the changes necessary for adopting the program. The program evaluation revealed that because the agencies represented on the state steering committee had statewide presence, leaders were able to authorize agency participation at the local level and sanction local stakeholder teams (Fuger & Abel, 2008).

It is recommended that the following agencies and organizations be actively involved in the project:

- **State social services agencies** generally serve offenders and ex-offenders and their families in a variety of ways including financial and medical assistance and food stamps. They are uniquely positioned to help identify the target population, provide resource and referral services, and coordinate training and technical assistance to the child support and income maintenance field staff. A workgroup that includes child support staff can develop draft policy for partial child support debt waivers and streamline procedures to

modify child support orders that are better aligned with parental income and ability to pay.

- **State early childhood agencies** can help identify children and families to participate in interventions, serve as an information and referral source, provide ongoing technical assistance in delivering services, and help coordinate and integrate family- and provider - training.
- **Head Start state collaboration offices and state Head Start associations** can play an important role in distributing information about Fathers for Life to Head Start programs throughout the state. The executive directors of both organizations should serve as members of the statewide steering team and can play pivotal roles in educating partnering agencies about Head Start and in identifying and prioritizing needy Head Start programs. They also can serve as consultants throughout program planning and implementation, serve as liaisons to Head Start programs, and provide presentations at meetings, conferences, and workshops. The executive directors will also be able to help coordinate training and ongoing technical assistance to Head Start teachers, service coordinators, and other professionals.
- **State corrections and probation and parole agencies** will be critical partners in identifying offender and ex-offender fathers and families for services. They will be able to implement fatherhood programming in state correctional facilities and provide information about community resources and supports to soon-to-be-released fathers. In addition, they will be able to develop and deliver specialized training to address officers' capacity to identify specific parenting needs and gain knowledge of community resources for referral.
- **State departments of education** will help identify the target population. When this agency is involved with local Parents as Teachers efforts, representatives will partner to identify school districts willing to go into prison facilities. Working through these districts, this agency will make group and individual parenting sessions available to fathers in selected correctional facilities and the community. They may also be able to serve as a resource and take the lead in linking Parents as Teachers and school districts to Head Start programs.
- **The State courts administrator agency** will be critical to coordinate activities involving fathers on probation or parole and local courts, including linkages with existing fathering and drug courts.
- **Workforce development agencies** are typically included in statewide teams to provide job development and employment-related services and life skills classes to fathers in correctional facilities and both parents in the community.
- **Institutions of higher education** can be vital partners in Fathers for Life. Many of them have access to technology services including satellite broadcasts and the ability to host distance learning options. Previous experience with distance learning options for Head

Start, child care providers, and parents indicates that these types of local options are strongly preferred for their proximity, familiarity, and access to high-quality content that might not otherwise be available in the community. In addition, university extension branches typically have an array of services available to families, including free tax return preparation, parent education classes, consumer and financial information sessions, youth programs, nutrition education, anger management workshops, family programming, and financial literacy education/consumer decision-making workshops.

At the state level, a faith-based partner with a compatible mission to Fathers for Life can bring values-driven participation, personal commitment, the ability to mobilize a statewide network of volunteers, and personal community linkages for support of the family and the transition of the father.

A father involved in the criminal justice system and a mother/caretaker of Head Start children with a father in the criminal justice system should be included in team membership. These individuals will ensure that all aspects of the project are grounded in real-life family experiences. Feedback from these individuals should help the group build effective recruitment strategies and provide information to ensure participation in rolling out the interventions.

While securing participation from such a diverse group of agencies and individuals may prove challenging, this type of network is attainable with a strong commitment to collaboration and a strategic approach that involves a great deal of one-on-one contact with potential stakeholders. Here are some things to keep in mind as you work to build your statewide steering team:

Things to Remember

- Identify an individual in each agency who has been part of new initiatives.
- Try to secure a commitment from a high-level decision maker in each agency. These individuals can drive the type of systems change that is a critical part of the Fathers for Life project.
- Begin your interactions with these individuals by describing the project's goals. Try to highlight project goals that most closely match their agency's goals.
- Try to make them feel that they are a valuable partner in the project. Ask for their opinions and input often and explain why their participation is critical.
- Be prepared to say how their agency can contribute to the project. You may want to prepare a list of potential contributions before your meeting. Be sure to ask the representative for their input on these potential contributions.
- Make sure to emphasize that the Fathers for Life project is a collaboration project directed and monitored by the statewide steering team. This means they will have a say in all aspects of its development and implementation.

Steering Team Management

The statewide steering team will play an integral part in the implementation of Fathers for Life. Management of this statewide effort will require a commitment to its leadership and administrative support. When considering the Fathers for Life project, it is important that significant attention is given to selecting an appropriate person to lead the statewide effort. While leadership may come from a variety of agencies including your state's Head Start

Association or the Head Start Collaboration Office, it is important to consider certain qualities and skills when selecting a leader. States should consider the following:

- Does the potential leader maintain significant and positive relationships with leaders of other state agencies demonstrating the ability to form and maintain new connections?
- Does the leader have a demonstrated ability to manage comprehensive and multi-faceted projects?
- Does the leader have excellent written and verbal communications skills?
- Does the leader have the type of “can-do” attitude and good problem-solving skills that will allow him or her to handle the challenges of a multi-faceted project?

Frequency of Meetings

It is recommended that statewide steering teams meet monthly during the initial phases of the project. This will allow types of collaborative relationships to develop that will be important to the project’s success, as well as allowing enough time to handle the decisions and tasks necessary to move the effort forward. As the focus shifts to local implementation, groups will want to examine meeting schedules that most effectively meet their needs. While face-to-face meetings seem critical at first, groups might consider allowing members to join via teleconference once effective collaboration is clearly established.

Focus of Meetings

It is critical that meetings are structured to create a decision-making and working body rather than one that serves in a purely advisory capacity. Meetings should challenge members to create a sustainable family support program, to find solutions to problems at various project levels, and to think actively about the significant contributions their agencies can make to this initiative. As with any project collaboration, the nature of the statewide steering team will likely change during various phases of implementation; however its commitment to sustainable systems change should remain strong throughout the process. Here are some things to keep in mind as you design meetings for the Fathers for Life statewide steering team:

- Meetings should include ample opportunities to build cohesiveness within the group. Much of this project’s impact will be a direct result of relationships formed during the process. Opportunities for team-building and making a group commitment to common goals will contribute greatly to the project’s positive outcomes.
- Meetings should help group members develop an in-depth knowledge of the project and its accompanying interventions. If you truly want to create a team that can champion the cause and the project, you will have to work deliberately to educate them about all aspects and benefits of the project.
- Statewide steering teams should be asked to comprehensively assess the resources currently available for families in their state and communities. One of the strengths of the Fathers for Life project is the flexibility to adapt its components to meet the unique needs of different states and communities. Decisions about implementation will be made most effectively after the team has assessed current resources and determined how the project will fit into existing agency cultures.
- Meetings should provide ample opportunities for members to provide feedback that will contribute to the initiative’s successful implementation. Each team member will have a

great deal of knowledge that can promote the project's success. Tapping their expertise will increase their commitment to the project.

Connecting With and Selecting Sites

One of the many important tasks of the statewide steering team will be to connect with and identify appropriate sites for participation in the Fathers for Life project. The involvement of state Head Start Associations and Collaboration Offices will be critical to this task. These groups will typically have multiple ways to communicate about opportunities with the Fathers for Life project, including newsletters and regular Head Start management meetings. Once Head Start agencies learn about opportunities and begin to respond, sites will have to be selected carefully. The statewide steering team should use a combination of the following strategies to select sites:

- Readily available statistics –Examine statistics such as rates of incarceration, poverty levels, and Head Start enrollment numbers.
- Readiness Survey – Included in Section 5 of this manual is a readiness assessment tool to help state teams identify project sites. This tool will help groups assess a Head Start agency's history of collaboration, openness to innovative approaches, effectiveness in involving fathers and families, and commitment to identifying children faced with parental incarceration. In response to the requirement that Head Start State Collaboration Offices conduct a needs assessment of Head Start grantees in their state, the Missouri Head Start State Collaboration Office played a significant role in developing the readiness survey that was then incorporated into the final needs assessment survey.
- In-Person Meetings with Program Management – After collecting appropriate statistics and analyzing readiness survey data, project managers should arrange for in-person meetings before finally choosing sites. These will allow leaders to determine the commitment level from Head Start management as well as the agency's ability to move the project forward.

Continuous Improvement

Sustainability should be an important consideration when designing the structure and infrastructure of the statewide steering team and the project itself. As is true of all project implementation groups, leadership can expect the nature of this statewide team to change during various phases of the initiative. While statewide teams may have more active roles during the early phases of design, work and decision-making typically shifts to local teams as movement toward local implementation continues.

The following describes the Missouri experience:

The state steering committee's role diminished during implementation once the system was in place. The project's focus shifted from the development of a system to the creation of curricula and products; preparation of coordinators, facilitators, and staff to implement the system; and establishment of teams at the local level. The steering committee continued to provide oversight through established communication tools and periodic meetings, and they expressed their interest in the local implementation process and outcomes (Fuger & Abel, 2008).

To maintain the integrity of the group and ensure that it continues to provide effective leadership to the project, groups may want to consider the following approaches:

- Provide regular opportunities to examine the group's makeup, considering new members and maintaining current commitment.
- Select evaluation strategies including post-intervention assessments and comprehensive tracking of participant numbers that will allow the group to make implementation adjustments to ensure project success.

In addition to these strategies, participating states may want to consider a “tiered” approach to implementation that will allow for adjustments during various stages of the process. Beginning the Fathers for Life implementation in a handful of sites allows statewide leadership to pilot sites and document processes to ensure success and replication in sites throughout the state.